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ABSTRACT

Graduate schools have responded to the problem of graduate student attrition by placing greater emphasis on selection, assuming that better, more informed admission decisions would result in declining attrition. Yet the problem persists, and the question arises as to whether attrition is due to individual characteristics of graduate students or to factors inherent in the structure and process of graduate education. This paper argues that attrition has less to do with what students bring to the university than with what happens to them after they have been admitted. It develops a social-structural explanation for persistent high attrition rates and why graduate schools have not developed effective solutions by bringing together attribution theory from social psychology (Jones & Nisbet, 1971; Ross, 1978); exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect theory from political economy (Hirschman, 1970); and the theory of greedy institutions from sociology (Coser, 1974). Graduate schools need to focus on the social forces which lead to atomism and pluralistic ignorance among students, forces which divide and isolate them from each other and from faculty, and which stifle voice and allow students to exist in silence. (Contains 24 references.) (Author/KAH)

Who is Responsible for Graduate Student Attrition--The Individual or the Institution? Toward an Explanation of the High and Persistent Rate of Attrition

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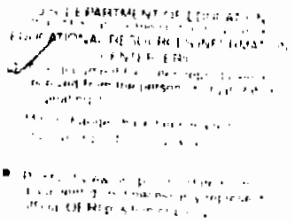

Who is Responsible for Graduate Student Attrition--The Individual or the Institution?
Toward an Explanation of the High and Persistent Rate of Attrition

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Despite increased attention to, and emphasis on, graduate student retention, graduate schools have faced persistently high attrition rates. While the exact figure is unknown, the literature on time-to-degree and student retention from at least the early 1960s to the present (Benkin, 1984; Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Katz & Hartnett, 1976; Nerad & Cerny, 1991; Wilson, 1965; Tucker, 1964) consistently estimate the attrition rate to be 50 percent. Graduate schools have responded to the problem of attrition by placing greater emphasis on selection, assuming that if they could only make better, more informed admission decisions, then the attrition rate would decline. Yet, the problem persists and may, in fact, be getting worse.

The emphasis on selection suggests that universities believe that the problem lies not with the graduate school and the dynamics of graduate education but with the students themselves. The question thus arises as to whether attrition is due to individual characteristics of graduate students or to factors inherent in the structure and process of graduate education.

This papers argues that attrition has less to do with what the student brings to the university than with what happens to the student after s/he has been admitted. It develops a social-structural explanation for why high attrition rates persist and why graduate schools have not developed effective solutions to the problem by bringing together explanatory concepts from three different intellectual and theoretical traditions: attribution theory from social psychology (Jones & Nisbett, 1971; Ross, 1978); exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect theory from political economy (Hirschman, 1970); and the theory of greedy institutions from sociology (Coser, 1974). Qualitative and quantitative data are used to support the arguments, where appropriate.

Methods

Although this paper is primarily a theoretical paper, the theory is supported by data from over 30 years of study of graduate education (e.g., Benkin, 1984; Berelson, 1960; Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Tucker, 1964; Wilson, 1965) as well as emerging data from an empirical survey and analysis of individuals who entered graduate school in the years 1982-1984 with the intention of attaining a Ph.D (i.e., both completers and noncompleters). The sample was drawn from two universities, one urban and one rural, which are among the top 40 Ph.D-granting universities in the United States and, within each university, from nine departments (three from the each of three major domains of knowledge: mathematics, chemistry, biology, economics, sociology, psychology, English, history, and music). Overall, 84.7 percent of the eligible sample was located, and the response rate from the located sample was 62 percent (69% completers, 54% noncompleters) for a total sample of 816 cases (511 completers, 305 noncompleters). Thirty noncompleters, approximately two from each department from each university participated in hour-long, focused, semi-structured telephone interviews in order to further explore issues that could not be addressed adequately by the survey instrument.

It's Not What the Student Brings to the University

Before presenting the theoretical explanation for the high and persistent rate of graduate student attrition, it is necessary to demonstrate that at the time of admission, students who complete their degrees

are virtually indistinguishable from those who do not, and that noncompleters may, in fact, have more of the characteristics thought to predict success than do completers.

Thirty-five years worth of studies using objective data find that lack of academic ability and academic failure account for only a small percent of attrition (Belt, 1976; Benkin, 1984; Berelson, 1960; Tinto, 1987; Tucker, 1964). For individuals admitted to doctoral programs with less than a 3.0 undergraduate grade point average (GPA), Tucker (1964) found that 60 percent completed the Ph.D and that this completion rate was almost identical to that of his total sample. Similarly, Benkin (1984) found that students with less than a 3.0 GPA were just as likely to complete the doctorate as any group except those with the highest GPAs. And self-report data on undergraduate GPA from this study's sample show no differences between completers and noncompleters (3.53 versus 3.55; $F(1/681)=0.46$, ns). Thus by all accounts, completers and noncompleters appear to be equally academically able and enter graduate school on the same academic footing.

If entering academic ability does not account for differences in attrition outcomes, then perhaps prior socialization to the academic profession as an undergraduate does. To determine this, the students in this study were asked a series of nine questions about prior socialization as undergraduates. These questions are also measures of undergraduate academic and social integration. On two of the nine questions (attend professional meetings and serve on departmental committees), noncompleters were significantly more likely than completers to have had the experience (see Table 1). Although not significant, on four of the remaining seven questions, a higher percentage of noncompleters engaged in the activity than did completers. When the nine questions are collapsed into a single index, the results indicate that noncompleters had more of the prior socialization/integration experiences that one would expect might predict completion than did completers (3.30 versus 3.02; $t(598)=1.96$, $p=.05$).

The fact that as undergraduates, noncompleters are slightly more academically integrated than completers suggests that they expected the same degree of integration as graduate students and became disillusioned when their experiences ran contrary to their expectations. Indeed, during the telephone interviews, one-third of the interviewees made spontaneous comparisons between their undergraduate experience and their graduate experience. In all instances, the students indicated that they had closer, warmer, and more personal and intellectually exciting interactions with faculty and students at their undergraduate institutions than they did in their graduate programs, and that the fun, joy, excitement, and challenge of exploring new ideas in creative and original ways--factors which motivated them to pursue graduate education--were missing from their graduate experience.

The prior socialization/academic integration findings combined with lack of difference in undergraduate GPA between completers and noncompleters indicates that universities are making appropriate selection decisions at the time of admission and that attrition is more a function of what transpires after the student enrolls in graduate school than a function of the abilities and experiences that the student brings to the graduate program. Having ruled out individual entering characteristics as the primary cause of attrition, it is necessary to seek the cause of attrition in the structure and process of graduate education itself.

The Social-Structural Context of Graduate Student Attrition

Standard rates across time in any social process, be it attrition, crime, or suicide, reflect social structures and social forces that remain relatively unchanged from year to year. According to Durkheim (1951/1897), these forces must be independent of individuals because the force acts with the same intensity, achieving the same end in the same numbers, on individuals who do not form a natural group and who are not in communication with one another. Thus, from a social-structural perspective, if the structures and processes of graduate education remain unchanged over time, one could not only expect a

Table 1. Prior Socialization Experiences as Undergraduates

	STATUS		
	COMPLETERS	NONCOMPLETERS	X^2
As an undergraduate student did you: (yes/no)			
a. receive mentoring	77.4 (370)	**80.8** (236)	1.26 **ns**
b. work as part of research team or music ensemble	**46.1** (223)	45.5 (223)	0.02 **ns**
c. publish article or chapter	**13.0** (63)	12.1 (35)	0.13 **ns**
d. present paper outside of classroom	18.8 (91)	**22.0** (64)	1.15 **ns**
e. subscribe to a professional journal	22.3 (108)	**27.8** (81)	3.00 **.08**
f. attend professional meetings	20.7 (100)	**27.0** (78)	4.02 *
g. belong to a professional association	**30.0** (145)	28.5 (83)	0.19 **ns**
h. serve on departmental committees	12.0 (58)	**18.2** (53)	5.69 *
I. belong to any campus organizations	63.3 (307)	**68.7** (200)	2.36 **ns**

* $p<.05$

constant attrition rate for graduate students, in general, but one could also expect standard patterns of variation in attrition rates across disciplines because of systematic differences in the social structures of the disciplines. To paraphrase Durkheim, the regular recurrence of identical events in proportions constant within the same population (discipline) but very inconstant from one population (discipline) to another would be inexplicable if each society (discipline) did not have a similar structure which affected its inhabitants with a similar force.

Thus, if graduate students are responsible for their own departure, then there should be no discernable pattern in their attrition. The lack of a pattern would indicate that psychological dispositions and private experiences which are independent of the university are the primary cause of attrition. By contrast, if the university is responsible for student attrition, then standard rates across time in the system should prevail.

Although no national data exist on attrition from graduate programs, data from studies on time-to-degree and graduate student persistence show a consistent pattern of attrition over time and by

discipline, with a slight increase in attrition over time (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992).[1] Table 2 presents attrition statistics for cohorts from 1950-1953 to 1972-1976. The data show an overall rate of attrition of roughly 40 to 55 percent from Tier-I[2] institutions and roughly 50 to 60 percent from all other institutions by recipients of prestigious fellowships. The sciences have the lowest attrition rates and time-to-degree (time-to-degree data not shown, see Wilson, 1965), the humanities the highest attrition rates and time-to-degree. The data thus support the contention that systemic forces are operating over time and across disciplines and that the onus of responsibility for student departure lies with the university, although as discussed below, neither the university nor the graduate student make the appropriate attribution.

Attribution of Responsibility for Graduate Student Attrition

The issue of the attribution of responsibility for students' departure from doctoral study has never been addressed directly. However, evidence from Berelson (1960) indicates that graduate deans, graduate faculty, and recent Ph.D recipients place the onus of responsibility for attrition more on the departing student than on the institution. Table 3 re-presents Berelson's data on reasons for doctoral attrition and categorizes the responses in terms of locus of responsibility: the departing student responsible versus the university responsible.

Graduate deans, who cite lack of financial resources (69 percent) as the major reason for graduate student attrition, are the one major exception in the tendency to hold the departing students personally responsible for their attrition. This response reflects their location in the organizational structure of the university. Given that a primary task of their job is the allocation of financial resources, it is not surprising that they view the problem in such terms. This response, however, contrasts sharply with their nonacceptance (1 percent) of the possibility that graduate students quit their programs because they become disappointed with graduate study, and, by implication, graduate school. Graduate faculty and degree recipients are more willing to concede this point, but not appreciably so. This nonacceptance suggests an unwillingness to acknowledge or consider the role that the structure and process of graduate education play in students' departure.

Conspicuously missing from Berelson's study are the departers, the actors themselves, and their reasons for leaving. The actor-observer model of attribution theory (Jones & Nisbett, 1971) in social psychology argues that actors and observers focus differently on the attribution situation. Actors focus on the situation (and tend to be more accurate in their judgments than observers [Jones & Nisbett, (1971)]), while observers focus on the personal dispositions of actors. This leads observers to make what is known as the fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1978). That is, observers tend to overestimate the role of actors' personal dispositions for an event and underestimate the situational causes of their actions. The reasons for attrition presented in the Berelson study come from observers only. Hence, there is good reason to believe that the graduate deans, graduate faculty, and degree completers have overestimated the

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[1] Bowen & Rudenstine (1992) contend that attrition rates have increased over the last three decades. According to Durkheim (1951/1897), patterned changes in rates over a long period of time indicate that the structural characteristics of society have simultaneously undergone profound changes. This finding for graduate student attrition suggests that the conditions of graduate education have deteriorated over time.

[2] Tier-I institutions are universities whose programs received top ratings from one or both of two graduate program quality rating systems: Roose and Andersen (1970) and Jones, Lindzey, and Coggeshall (1982) [Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992].

Table 2. Attrition Rates by Over Time and Across Disciplines

Study/ Cohort	Source	Overall Attrition	Sciences Physical	Sciences Life	Social Sciences	Humanities
1950-1953[1]	Tucker (1964)	38.1%	29.5% (2[illegible]-44%)	28.7% (20-51%)	41.2% (32 - 57%)	49.8% (43-67%)
--[2]	Berelson (1960)	40.0%	--		--	--
Woodrow Wilson Fellows (1957-1961)[3]	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p. 152)	55.0/59.9	42.0/48.8		57.9/59.8	65.0/[illegible]1.1
Woodrow Wilson Fellows (1962-1966)[3]	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p. 152)	49.0/59.8	37.3/47.3		50.9/66.9	58.7/65.2
NDEA Graduate Fellows 1962[3]	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p. 152)	41.7/51.7	28.6/50.0		43.8/48.1	52.6/57.1
Ten-University Data Set (1967-1971)[4]	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p. 128)	--	33.2		44.9	

NSF Fellows (1962 1976)	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p.125)	--	35.1	42.2	--
Ten-University Data Set (1972-1976)	Bowen & Rudenstine (1992, p. 128)	--	37.3	55.0	

[1]The study was restricted to individuals enrolled as doctoral students in the traditional arts and science fields at 24 selected universities.
[2]The attrition figure is based on the estimates of graduate deans who were surveyed in June 1959. Graduate faculty estimated overall attrition to be 20 percent.
[3]The first figure represents attrition of fellows from tier-one universities, the second figure represents attrition from all other universities.
[4]The data come from eight of the ten universities in the data set. No overall attrition rate is given. Data for the humanities and the social sciences are combined into a category called English, History, and Political Science.

Table 3. Attribution of Responsibility for Departure from Doctoral Study

Percent of Graduate Deans, Graduate Faculty, and Degree Recipients Citing Specific Reasons for Doctoral Attrition

	Graduate Deans	Graduate Faculty	Degree Recipients
Departing Student Responsible			
Lack of intellectual ability to do the work	50%	64%	52%
Lack of proper motivation	38	45	47
Lack of necessary physical or emotional stamina	33	33	49
University Responsible			
Lack of financial resources	69	29	25
Disappointed in graduate study and quit	1	12	21
Other			
Found the degree was not necessary for what they wanted to do	19	10	12

Source: Berelson (1960), p. 169.

departers' personal responsibility for their attrition[3]. In doing so, they remove the need to seek a situational explanation for departure from doctoral study, thereby exonerating the university.

Contrary to the actor-observer model discussed above, the argument to follow contends that departers (actors) will place a higher degree of blame on themselves for their attrition than would normally be predicted by attribution theory. Serge, Begin & Palmer (1989) argue that a strict psychological orientation to the actor-observer model of attribution theory is too narrow and that the complexity of the social context in which attributions are made must be considered. In particular, they argue that self-blame and system-blame causal attributions result from socialization in a particular context and that this socialization may lead actors to make more internal attributions than would

[3]As part of this study, the Directors of Graduate Study (DGS) in each of the 18 departments were interviewed by phone and face-to-face interviews were conducted with 33 faculty members, roughly two from each department. Both groups were asked what they thought were the primary reasons students left graduate school without completing their degrees as well as what they thought contributed most to degree completion. In response to the former question, the DGSs and faculty tended to attribute attrition to student dispositions but in response to the latter question provided more situational explanations, such as having a good advisor.

normally be expected.

As the literature on graduate student socialization and the graduate school experience demonstrates (Lovitts, forthcoming dissertation) graduate school is a complex social setting that provides intense socialization and resocialization experiences. Graduate students often find themselves at the bottom of a status hierarchy and in a dependent relationship with their professors. Despite their efforts to please the powers that be, they often do not know or fully understand what those powers want. Consequently, many students come to feel inadequate and, therefore, may reify and attribute this inadequacy to themselves instead of the structure of the situation. Indeed, in his discussion of anomic suicide, Durkheim (1951/1897, p. 285) argues that persons abruptly cast down below their accustomed status in situations in which they thought themselves in control either blame themselves or someone else for this turn of events. Regardless of the object of blame (self or other), Durkheim argues that the individual will revolt against the cause, real or imaginary, to which he/she attributes his/her downfall and seek solace in the act of self-destruction (suicide/attrition).

As a means of tapping students' attributions of responsibility for their leaving (self or system) the noncompleters who were interviewed were asked two related questions, one indirect, the other direct "Did you ever feel that if you had done things differently you might not have left?" and "Did you ever feel responsible or blame yourself for your own leaving?" Regardless of how the question was phrased, the interviewees were twice as likely to take responsibility or blame themselves for their leaving than they were to attribute their leaving to the system in which they were embedded.

In response to the former question, several interviewees took explicit responsibility for their decisions, asserting that they were not forced out, that they made a conscious decision to leave. Others implied personal responsibility in that they felt that they should have been more forceful or assertive in dealing with faculty or felt they should have had more knowledge about the program before they enrolled. Those who attributed their leaving to the system felt that there were problems in the administrative structure of the department (it was not honest about its expectations for students, it was not really receptive to students' interests) or problems with the faculty in general (they did not provide proper guidance, support, or advice).

In response to the latter question, the modal self-blame response is summed up best by Boyd who was enrolled in a rather dysfunctional department with a very high attrition rate (91 percent),[4] "I feel completely responsible for deciding to go there, [for] what I did when I was there, and [for] leaving," indicating that he, and others, did not see the decision to leave as something brought about by the social structure. Similarly, Beatrice's response, below, is illustrative of the way in which some students blame themselves, at least initially, for things that are beyond their control. Beatrice, who left after four years when her funding ran out, had an advisor who was out of the country more than he was in and did not go to bat for his students, yet Beatrice blamed herself for her attrition:

> Interviewer. Did you feel responsible for your leaving? Did you ever blame yourself for it?
>
> Beatrice: Sometimes. Like I say, I didn't play the politics. It might have made a difference. Maybe if I had really fought for [funding] more, but, I don't know. At first, I mostly blamed

[4] This department weeded out at the masters level. Both interviewees from that department characterized it as a very competitive and hostile environment. In addition, between 1981 and 1993, the department had a very high faculty turnover rate (this study found a 0.6 correlation between faculty turnover and student attrition), indicating that something was fundamentally wrong in that department. Furthermore, when confronted with the data on faculty turnover in that department, my contact in the graduate school acknowledged that during the time period in which the study's cohort was enrolled, there were a lot of problems in that department.

myself and then I thought, no, it wasn't entirely my fault.

Interviewer. What did you blame yourself for?

Beatrice: Well, like I say, for not being streetwise, you might say.

Interviewer. What made you think it might be your fault?

Beatrice: Well, just the fact that I didn't get any [funding], and then I realized it had nothing to do with me. Not entirely. It wasn't a personal thing because a lot of people like, I got some sympathy, "Oh I'm so sorry you didn't get funding," but I didn't have anybody pulling for me to get it for me, and maybe I should have pushed a little harder myself.

Interviewer. So you feel you were still responsible for getting your own money?

Beatrice: To some extent.

The students' responses to questions about responsibility and blame support the contention that given the complex nature of the situation in which they are embedded, rather than blaming the situation as attribution theory suggests they should, some take full responsibility for their decision and/or blame themselves for not being able to complete their degrees even when the cause of their attrition stems from the structure of the situation. It is this self-blame that not only inhibits students from realizing that some of their difficulties lie within the system and not within themselves, but prevents them from voicing their discontents because they have internalized the locus of responsibility.

The structure of the graduate school also leads to a high degree of pluralistic ignorance among graduate students. The competitive environment does not encourage students to admit that they are having difficulty understanding what is expected of them or that they are having difficulty fulfilling expectations that are often unrealistic. Thus, when graduate students who are struggling see other graduate students putatively thriving, they come to believe that they are the only ones having problems and attribute their difficulties to their own inadequacies and not to the structure of the situation. The case of India is illustrative of the degree of pluralistic ignorance among graduate students and the way in which pluralistic ignorance leads to inappropriate attributions. Her remarks show that those students who knew or understood things about the program that are often not made explicit to graduate students assumed that everyone else knew and understood them too, and that those students who did not know these things assumed they were the only ones who did not, and, consequently, were reluctant to let on that they did not know or understand and blamed themselves for their "ignorance."

Interviewer: Did you ever feel that other graduate students knew or understood things about the program or being a graduate student that you didn't?

India: Yes. They seemed to understand, some of the people who came in when I did already knew what their thesis was going to be on and had already picked out an area they were going to hone in on when they did their Ph.D. They were already that far ahead, and they were already working towards that. And it never occurred to me that I had to be that far ahead because nobody had ever mentioned it.

Interviewer: How did you feel about knowing that other graduate students knew or understand

things about the program or being a graduate student that you didn't?

India: It made me feel stupid. It made me feel like I should have known all that, and yet I don't know how anybody could because the school I went to [as an undergraduate] did not have graduate students on campus. There was no graduate program, so I had never been exposed to it before. And I didn't know anybody who had gone on intimately enough to ask questions. I mean I knew people who had gone for their masters and talked to them, but never about the nitty gritty of the department and how the programs went and things.... But yet, you felt rather stupid asking the questions [at Rural University] because people looked at you like you should have already thought about that, not faculty but, I mean, some of the other graduate students.

Interviewer: What did you do about it?

India: What did I do about it? I took a leave of absence.

Interviewer: What did you do about feeling stupid or not knowing what other students seemed to know?

India: I talked to other students in our office and some of them were having the same experience and some of them really and truly had thought about some of [these things] before hand or were much better prepared for it than I was. So, they didn't seem to see it as a major problem. So, if at least you talked to someone, now, you didn't feel quite so ignorant ... I think that a lot of us didn't really understand how the program all worked. I mean there wasn't really, there was an orientation, but, to be honest, it didn't tell you that much about the school. A lot of the kids that I was in with had gone to Rural for undergrad so they already knew some of the professors and knew the campus and they knew the building and knew how things went 'cause they'd had graduate students in their classes the whole time and things. So they had a better exposure to it and it was different for them than it was for us.

The high rate and persistent rate of attrition can thus be partially explained by the failure of the university and the individual to make the appropriate attribution and is further supported by the following chain of reasoning: If students take personal responsibility for their failure to complete their degrees, they should exit without giving voice to their discontent. However, if students place responsibility for their failure on the university, they should give voice to their discontent with the system. If departing students were giving voice to their discontent, then one would expect universities to take notice and take appropriate self-corrective actions (Hirschman, 1970). If this were the case, then one would expect to see both a far lower attrition rate than that which prevails and a decline in the attrition rate over time. However, the constant and high rate of attrition indicates that students are departing without voice, and this lack of voice is a strong indicator of self-blame. The next section combines attribution theory with the theory of exit, voice, loyalty, and neglect and that of greedy institutions to further explain the high and persistent rate of graduate student attrition.

Why Aren't Universities More Responsive to Student Attrition?

Stifled Voices, Silent Exit

Graduate students, like consumers or members of any organization can express their discontent with the system in two ways. They can stop purchasing the university's product (i.e., education), and leave the university (exit) or they can express dissatisfaction to some authority or engage in some general protest (voice) (Hirschman, 1970). Given the amount of personal and financial investment graduate students make in their programs, one would expect graduate students to vociferously and vigorously exercise the voice option. Yet, as data from the survey based on exit, voice, loyalty and neglect (EVLN) theory (Hirschman, 1970) indicate, they tend to exit silently and alone

Application of EVLN theory to graduate education leads to the prediction that completers will be more likely to engage in voice and loyalty behaviors than noncompleters and that noncompleters will be more likely to engage in exit and neglect behaviors than completers. To test this theory, the students were asked two questions about each type of behavior. In addition to analyzing the items individually, the items were indexed into single voice, loyalty, exit, and neglect factors according to the number of "yes" responses given to the two items (0-2) The data for the factors in Table 4, below, reflect the percentage of students who gave one or two "yes" responses to the items composing the factor. The table also presents affirmative responses to the individual items in each category.

Although a higher percentage of students in general responded affirmatively to the voice questions than any of the others, completers were significantly more likely than noncompleters to give voice to their discontent, and even though there were no significant differences between completers and noncompleters with respect to loyalty behavior, the trend is in the predicted direction. By contrast, noncompleters were significantly more likely than completers to engage in exit and neglect behaviors.

These results have bearing on the issue of attribution of responsibility for student attrition and the failure of universities to take appropriate self-corrective actions, because, as the data indicate, departers tend to leave silently and alone. That is, noncompleters do not band together and do not give voice their discontent, in general, or to people in positions of power (i.e., university administrators), in particular.

Only indirect support for this latter contention (voice to administrators) can be obtained because the voice question was improperly framed. Instead of asking the students about voice to other graduate students (item e), the question should have asked about voice to university administrators. Fortunately, university administrators were included as options in two other voice-related questions. One question asked how often students discussed their feelings about being a graduate student with a variety of people including university administrators. All told, 11.8 percent of completers talked with university administrators compared with 18.5 percent of the noncompleters. Although more noncompleters did speak with administrators than completers, both percents are very low as was the mean frequency of interaction with administrators (1.17 for completers versus 1.28 for noncompleters on a 5-point scale (never-often)). The second voice-related question asked noncompleters about with whom they discussed their leaving. Only 33 (17.6%) of noncompleters indicated that they discussed their leaving a university administrator. However, both these voice-related questions are deficient because students were not asked what type of administrator they spoke with. Did they speak with people in position to effect changes in the structure and process of graduate education such as the president/chancellor, provost, or graduate dean or did they speak with more powerless administrators such as financial aid officers, registrars, deans of students, or someone charged with conducting exit interviews? There is some indirect evidence in the data to suggest that the administrators students spoke with were more likely to be financial aid administrators than deans as students from Urban University, which admitted students

Table 4. Exit, Voice, Loyalty, and Neglect: Students Behaviors During Periods of Dissatisfaction with Their Graduate Programs

	STATUS		
	COMPLETERS	NONCOMPLETERS	X^2
Responses to periods of dissatisfaction with graduate program: (yes/no)			
VOICE (yes to one or both voice questions)	**85.7 (366)**	**73.6 (170)**	**14.64 2 df *****
a. Talk to faculty and try and make things better	54.0 (235)	50.0 (116)	0.98 **ns**
e. Seek help or advice from other graduate students	78.4 (337)	63.2 (146)	17.57 ***
LOYALTY (yes to one or both loyalty questions)	**61.3 (260)**	**55.3 (126)**	**2.75 2 df ns**
b. Wait and hope the problem would solve itself	58.4 (251)	52.8 (121)	1.86 **ns**
f. Say nothing to others and assume things would work out	28.9 (123)	23.5 (54)	2.21 **ns**
EXIT (yes to one or both exit questions)	**22.0 (94)**	**48.9 (111)**	**50.09 2 df *****
c. Explore other graduate schools or graduate programs	14.6 (63)	27.6 (64)	16.49 ***
g. Start looking for a job	11.9 (51)	29.5 (67)	31.11 **

NEGLECT (yes to one or both neglect questions)	16.3 (70)	35.2 (81)	31.60 2 df ***
d. Miss classes or stay away from the department	9.5 (41)	25.5 (59)	30.13 ***
h. Stop doing readings, research, or other graduate work	11.2 (48)	21.3 (49)	12.29 ***
I. did not experience dissatisfaction	14.8 (72)	10.0 (25)	3.31 .069

* p<.05; ** p<.01; ***p<.001

without financial aid, indicated that the talked with administrators more frequently (but at a low level) than students from Rural University (1.17 versus 1.30; F(1/796)=5.36, p<.05), with the two-way Status-by-University interaction showing the effect to be due to Urban completers. However, who in administration students spoke with and what they spoke about remains an issue for further empirical study.

The interview data, however, lend support to the contention that when departers speak with administrators, they do not speak with the most powerful ones. Only one interviewee indicated that he spoke with an administrator, a dean, about the way a course was being taught. His concerns were looked into but essentially brushed off. Most of the other interviewees with whom this topic was discussed never even considered the possibility of talking to an administrator--including the department chair--or chose not to for political reasons (e.g., the department chair was their advisor). Thus, despite the deficiencies in the voice question, it does not appear that people in powerful positions in university administration are privy to students' concerns about and discontents with their graduate programs, and, consequently, they lack the information necessary both to make appropriate attributions about attrition and to take appropriate remediative actions..

Students' silent exit raises two questions: Why don't students exercise voice? and Why don't universities respond to their exodus? The answer to both questions lies in the organizational structure of doctoral education. Graduate schools are greedy institutions (Coser, 1974). Greedy institutions make great demands on their members in terms of commitments, loyalty, time, and energy. In contrast to total institutions (e.g, jails) which use external coercion to achieve their ends (Goffman, 1961), greedy institutions rely on voluntary compliance--commitment and loyalty. They maximize compliance by appearing as highly desirable places to be, by proffering selective admission and membership, and, in the case of graduate education, by promising highly desirable rewards (high-paying, high-status, prestigious jobs) to those who make it through.

Greedy institutions enact structures and demands that socially distance their members from ordinary citizens. They insulate their members from competing roles and relationships, thereby focusing all their members' attention and energy inward on the institution and its goals. The structures and

demands of greedy institutions lead members to develop identities that are restricted to the role-set of the greedy institution, in this case, the doctoral program.

Members of doctoral programs believe themselves to be a highly selected, heteronomous group, chosen for their intelligence, ability, and competence. They are aware that they are in a system where the most desirable rewards (fellowships, assistantships, faculty sponsorship, and subsequent job placement) go to the best and the brightest. Consequently, they are always in competition with one another and they each play the role of the graduate student who is everything the system selected him or her to be: brilliant, self-assured, confident, and making it through the system without any major problems.

This competition and role playing leads to pluralistic ignorance among graduate students about how they are really faring in the system and how the system is affecting them. The system and its reward structures create an environment that prevents students from sharing their concerns about their current status in, and progress through, the program. This barrier contributes to a lack of socioemotional integration among graduate students because the cause of their discomfort or discontent is so linked to their identities and such an admission of "inadequacy" is highly self-threatening. As a result of the structure of the situation, the university is able to isolate graduate students from one another and insulate itself from a general protest because the students cannot identify a common problem to rally around.

For example, Kleinman (1983), found that the questions faculty and advanced students ask new students make them feel uncomfortable. Most new students felt threatened by the conventional opener, "What's your area?" The question suggested to new students that they should have already solved the question of professional identity. The students inferred that a bona fide graduate student was one who entered the program with an area of specialization and that individuation was expected and taken for granted. Students who did not have an "area" felt that they were not legitimate graduate students. Each student believed that he or she was the only one who had not yet found an area. To save face, entering students acted as though they had solved the problem. The faculty thus created a situation that fostered pluralistic ignorance among new graduate students.

Any student who attempts to break through the atomism created by the pluralistic ignorance risks exposing himself or herself as an impostor[1], a person who does not have "the stuff" that it takes to be a member of "The Select." Consequently, forces in the system prevent graduate students from discovering that many of their problems lie within the system and not within themselves. As a result, graduate students do not band together and protest. And students who are having trouble with the system wallow in their ignorance and blame themselves for their "failings."

Within greedy institutions, novitiates also hold low status positions (Coser, 1974). In graduate schools, graduate students are expected to acknowledge the authority of the socializing agents, the graduate faculty, and to submit themselves to it in all matters relevant to the socializing process. As several commentators point out (Egan, 1989; Goodman, 1989; Rosen & Bates, 1967), this arrangement has a paradoxical quality to it: Graduate students are expected to perform as mature, independent (though fledgling) scholars in an authoritarian social structure where they are in a subordinate and dependent position socially, intellectually, and financially. The status asymmetry between graduate students and graduate faculty leads graduate students to believe that they have no alternatives to their present state of dependence and, hence, they acquiesce to the demands placed upon them because they

[1]Research (Clance & Imes, 1978; Harvey, Kidder, & Sutherland, 1981) has suggested that many high achievers experience "imposter phenomenon," an intense, subjective self-perception of phoniness and a secret belief that they are actually less competent or intelligent than their peers. They concomitantly fear eventual discovery and unmasking by professionally significant others.

feel they have no opportunity for choice--or voice. To voice discontent represents one's inability to handle a situation into which one has voluntarily placed oneself, a personal shortcoming. It is also a sign of disloyalty, if not treason. Consequently, graduate students exit in silence.

Power and Complacency

As greedy institutions, graduate schools have a degree of monopoly power over graduate students. They provide a connoisseur good for which there are few readily available substitutes. The more prestigious and specialized a graduate department or program, the more power the department or program has over graduate students. This power derives from the lack of interchangability with other graduate programs and results in a reduction of competition with other schools for quality students; in a restriction of enrolled graduate students' options and freedom of movement; and in a growing complacency or "laziness" in the institution itself.

Hirschman (1970) argues that "those who hold power in lazy monopolies may actually have an interest in creating some limited opportunities for exit on the part of those whose voice might be uncomfortable" (p. 60, emphasis in original). To allow students to voice discontent would force the university to confront the deterioration[5] of its product and force it to change--and changing universities has been described as harder than moving a graveyard. Furthermore, to allow students voice would potentially challenge the university's control over students and upset the social order--a medieval social order that dates back to the 11th century in which fealty and knowing one's place in the status hierarchy functioned to perpetuate the system.

In addition, universities have few, if any, formal mechanisms in place which allow graduate students to voice their complaints cheaply and effectively. Thus by stifling voice and permitting exit, universities can persist in a state of "comfortable mediocrity" (Hirschman, 1970, p. 59). Deficiencies need not be exposed, deadwood need not be rekindled, and dissatisfied and discontent students need not be accommodated.

Another reason why graduate schools do not respond to exit is that the demand for admission to graduate school is highly inelastic. Graduate schools face a steady pool of quality applicants from which they continuously attempt to select the best. A student who leaves can be always be replaced. As will be discussed below, exit actually benefits the university and helps perpetuate false assumptions about graduate education.

Unlike "normal" organizations in which consumers purchase the product supplied, graduate schools frequently pay their consumers to attend: the better the perceived quality of the consumer, the higher the price universities pay in fellowships, scholarships, and assistantships. And unlike "normal" organizations in which the human capital investments made in members contribute immediately and directly to the functioning of the organization, investments made in graduate students only benefit the organization indirectly and in the long-run in the form of reflected glory--and only if the now-former student makes important contributions to his or her field.

Because students who obtain degrees reflect on their alma maters, graduate schools have a vested, though latent, interest in seeing that only "the best of the best" get through. This interest often leads graduate schools to the false and tautological conclusion that those who make it through are the "The Best" and that those who leave before completing their degrees are of lesser quality--a contemporary trial-by-ordeal.

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[5]Hirschman (1970, p.6) argues that occasional decline as well as prolonged mediocrity in relation to achievable performance levels must be counted among the many penalties of progress.

The assumptions underlying this conclusion create a tolerance for exit. The assumptions also allow the university to maintain the illusion that it was not responsible for the exodus of half its students and that all it has to do to reduce exit is make better, more informed admissions decisions. Consequently, when students exit, resources in the form of financial aid and faculty time and effort are freed up. The university is now free to invest in new, hopefully, higher quality students in whom it would have been unable to invest had other students not left. The university thus benefits from attrition.

Conclusion

If universities are sincere in their desire to reduce doctoral student attrition, then they should shift their attention from the individual to the institution itself. The high and persistent rate of attrition over time indicates that efforts to improve retention by placing increased emphasis on selection at the time of admission has been ineffective, and, possibly, counterproductive. Evidence exists that shows no differences between completers and noncompleters in entering academic ability and that even students admitted to doctoral programs with low undergraduate grade point averages complete the Ph.D at almost the same rate as those with high undergraduate grade point averages. Thus criteria currently in place to select students based on demonstrated academic ability are not good predictors of success. Indeed, the more selective graduate schools become in their admissions processes, the more pressure graduate students may feel to maintain the illusion that everything is fine and dandy, that they understand the structures, processes, and expectations of their graduate program completely, and that sharing concerns, doubts, and uncertainties is a weakness to be avoided at all costs. As a consequence, universities cannot learn about the true causes of student discontent and cannot take the proper remediative actions.

In order to redress the problem of attrition, graduate schools need to focus on the structure and process of graduate education itself. In particular, they need to focus on the social forces which lead to atomism and pluralistic ignorance among graduate students, forces which divide and isolate students from each other and from faculty and which stifle voice and allow students to exit in silence. Graduate schools need to devise mechanisms that allow students to air their concerns about their programs and their treatment without fear that they will be diminished in the eyes of their fellow graduate students and the faculty who train them and without fear that they will be jeopardizing their fellowships, assistantships, and subsequent job placement.

Removing the forces which lead to atomism and pluralistic ignorance among graduate students is not enough. These divisive forces need to be replaced by structures and forces which integrate students into the academic and social systems of their departments and programs. Such integrative forces have the added benefit of creating the community spirit that engenders the creative and innovative processes that graduate education is about.

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